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Turning Points: Finding Experiential Forks in the Path to Wisdom and Virtues

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This article was originally published in the
Self, Motivation & Virtue Project's e-Newsletter 06 (July 2016).

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The Self, Motivation & Virtue Project is a 3-year, interdisciplinary research initiative on the moral self. It is funded by generous support from the Templeton Religion Trust, the University of Oklahoma, the Spencer Foundation, and Marquette University.

TURNING POINTS: FINDING EXPERIENTIAL FORKS IN THE PATH TO WISDOM AND VIRTUES

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People often believe that, by adulthood, the psychology of the way they think, feel, believe, and act is set in stone—that an adult’s personality cannot really change. In part, this may be why people think that wisdom is something unattainable because they think you are either wise or you are not. Wisdom is not just what you know but the way in which you use what you know. However, research at the Chicago Center for Practical Wisdom (wisdomresearch.org) has focused on studying wisdom in the context of Aristotelian phronesis or practical wisdom: When faced with certain situations, is it possible to make a wiser decision, a decision that will increase human flourishing? If so, what can help someone make a wiser decision. Sir John Templeton said that wisdom cannot be taught. But can it be learned? Are there experiences that can lead someone to make a wiser decision? In our lab, we think about this question as falling within the context of the problem of “learning the unlearnable.” How can people “learn” things that are thought to be a fixed part of who we are? For example, we have taught adults without perfect pitch, to have perfect pitch even though it has been claimed that you can only acquire perfect pitch as a child (Van Hedger et al., 2015).

It could be that improving a listening skill is different from acquiring virtues such as wisdom. But we can think about wisdom as a decision-making skill, one that leads to human flourishing, then perhaps anyone can improve at wisdom rather than waiting for it to come with old age. There is a belief that certain kinds of experiences, adverse experiences like trauma can change personality for the better, although research does not clearly support this belief (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). People attribute positive personality growth, including an increase in wisdom, to adverse experiences on the one hand, but at the same time, there are clear examples of trauma and hardship leading to embitterment, depression, and anger. This suggests that extreme experiences can lead to positive *or* negative outcomes. If true, the effect of experience may depend more on psychological characteristics of the person having the experience than the experience itself. Indeed, with our work on training perfect pitch, some people have better memory

for sound than others and this aids in learning perfect pitch. What aids in becoming a little wiser or indeed more virtuous in any way from an experience?

Jonathan Lear (2011) wrote about “experiential irony” as a kind of turning point or moment of insight in perspective on one’s self in the world. Irony in speaking occurs when there is a disjunction between an intended message and what is actually said. For example, saying, “You are a great student!” to a failing student is ironic speech. From Lear, irony in experience is when we understand that we use skills and abilities in a social role that we identify with but these skills and abilities can be applied in a broader way, in ways that are outside the bounds of the typical fulfillment of that role. For example, a professor realizing that expertise used in academia can be used teach outside the classroom in ways that have impact on uninformed legislators. Teaching then is not just an act just performed for registered students in a class, but an act of creating learning in anyone. Lear wrote that the emotional realization of this experiential irony can create an important moment of reflection that can change perspective and behavior for the future, perhaps changing an aspect of personality.

Reflection upon an experience may therefore be an important cause of change in perspective and personality. Not coincidentally, reflection is an important intellectual virtue that is also important in wisdom. Tiberius (2008) argued that wisdom depends on being able to reflect from different perspectives, other people’s perspectives, about the value of the outcome of choices. In making a decision, taking into account the values of others by adopting their perspectives is critical to human flourishing. Understanding the perspectives and values of others depends on epistemic humility, which entails the recognition that the perspectives of others are important and entails further the willingness to internalize those perspectives so as to effectively use them. In addition, this ability to adopt other perspectives, and balance and consider how possible choices compare in terms of human flourishing, in relation to moral values, requires cognitive control and working memory to hold everything in mind.

This gives us an idea of we need to benefit from experiences that might make us a little wiser (see Williams & Nusbaum, 2016). We need the ability to *reflect* on values and virtues through taking on the perspectives of others. We need *humility* to understand and internalize the perspectives of others as if our own. This might also include the *curiosity* to really want to understand others. And we need the cognitive mechanisms of *attention* and *working memory* to focus on what is important and to hold these things in mind during reflection. There are likely other skills or abilities we need but this is certainly a starting point in terms

of foundational intellectual virtues and psychological mechanisms important for wisdom.

What kinds of experiences can lead to increases in wisdom or prompt wiser decisions? We have examined how experience is related to wisdom by considering practices (i.e., long term experiences) that have been associated with wisdom such as meditation, as well as others that are not associated with wisdom such as ballet, that do also require effort over time. We found that while ballet dancers may start out lower in measured wisdom than meditators for both ballet dancers and meditators there is a significant relationship between years of experience in dancing or meditating and measured wisdom (Williams et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is not the case that years of practice in anything always relate to increased wisdom. We did not find any relationship between years of practice at the Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais (two practices for bodily control) and wisdom. We have also found that experience making economic trades reduces economic decision biases leading to more rational decisions related to a specific neural mechanism—reduction in activity in the anterior insula which changes with trading experience on eBay (Tong et al., in press). Studies such as these show us that there are many kinds of experience that can lead to wiser decisions. On the one hand, we do not necessarily have to suffer trauma to become wiser. On the other, we do need to understand what characteristics of a person lead to the benefits of different kinds of experience. Finally, it seems quite plausible that the virtues and cognitive skills that may serve as the foundations of wiser decisions can also be strengthened by experience to further learn the unlearnable.

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